

Thalia's Sweetest Child: Dora Jordan and the Performance of Maternity

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Though bracketed by centuries of greater social restrictions, the long eighteenth century stands as a moment in time when women enjoyed a considerable measure of agency and social acceptance during pregnancy. Judith Schneid Lewis writes, “at no time during the century does there seem to have been any social taboo against appearing visibly pregnant in public, contrary to popular myth” (124). If you were a woman living in the latter half of the eighteenth century, this was fortunate, for, in the words of France’s Queen Consort Marie Leczinska (1703-1768), women were “always going to bed, always pregnant, always giving birth” (qtd. Flandrin 217). In the time period my study covers, 1688-1807, the average woman gave birth to between six and eight children in her lifetime (Lewis 6; Davidoff and Hall 223). In part, social acceptance of pregnant women arose as childbearing came to be considered less in the light of ritual and more in the light of natural phenomenon, as part of everyday life instead of a departure from it (Lewis 155).

In this same century, an important shift was occurring in the professional British theatre. The eighteenth century saw a rise in the respectability of acting as a profession, and of the celebrity stage actress. 18th century actresses (though still objectified) were able to use their status as recognizable public figures to develop alternative narratives to the traditional association of actresses with prostitution. In addition to being individuals and professionals in their own right, actresses used their status as wives, but particularly mothers, to divorce themselves from the stigma of sexual licentiousness and to legitimate their lucrative stage careers. The career of actress Dora Jordan (1761-1816) demonstrates how an eighteenth century

celebrity actress was able to use her maternal status to protect herself against charges of unprofessional and amoral behavior.



Figure 1 George Romney, *Mrs. Jordan as The Country Girl*, 1786

From 1785 to 1812, Dora Jordan reigned as the Thalia, the comic muse, at Drury Lane theatre. She also had fourteen children and regularly performed while in the visible stages of pregnancy. In her career she primarily played sprightly virgins, cross-dressing heroines, the rakish dissolute Sir Harry Wildair, and the hopelessly spoiled boy hero Little Pickle, all while visibly and frequently pregnant. Despite this, her audience rarely found pregnancy to have a negative impact on their perception of the fictional role; by this I mean that audience members did not complain when

a pregnant Mrs. Jordan played a virginal heroine, or when Little Pickle became a rather more than usually chubby child. Jordan's maternity, however, featured greatly in moments of crisis as a means of legitimating her status as a theatrical professional and defending her conduct in private life.

Though known as Mrs. Jordan, Dora never married; the name was assumed during her first pregnancy to protect her fledgling career. In the course of her residency at Drury Lane, she had two long-term monogamous relationships. The first of these was with Richard Ford, a lawyer and aspiring politician, the second with the Duke of Clarence, who became King William IV in 1830. In this paper, I will delve into a moment of crisis in Jordan's life and career in which her performance of maternity became essential to maintaining her positive relationship with her audience, and therefore her position within the theatrical community. This crisis came in the fall

of 1791, when Jordan ended her relationship with Ford to begin her relationship with the Duke of Clarence.

Dora Jordan came to London in 1785 with her mother and four-year-old daughter Fanny to take up a contract at Drury Lane. Fanny's existence was (rather extraordinarily and romantically) explained in the *Public Advertiser* as the result of Dora's marriage to "a sea-faring man, who left her the next morning" (qtd. Fothergill 95). Dora quickly became a beloved public figure. Charles Lamb wrote, "her childlike spirit shook off the load of years from her spectators; she seemed one whom care could not come near; a privileged being sent to teach mankind what he most wants—joyousness" (qtd. Fothergill 74). Her acting style was natural and sincere, most especially her laugh, which was said to make even the dourest of statesmen respond with joy. She was petite, with masses of curly brown hair, famously beautiful legs, and an agile style of movement. Soon after her arrival in London, she began her relationship with Richard Ford. The couple remained together for five years, during which time they had three children, two girls and a short-lived boy. During this time, Mrs. Jordan was received as Mrs. Ford socially, and both Dora and Richard allowed the public to assume they were in fact married (Tomalin 75). In doing so, they lent a kind of legitimacy to their children and respectability to their relationship they would not otherwise have enjoyed. Unfortunately, when the relationship ended, it was clear that they had never been married.

The relationship ended after the Duke of Clarence (third son of George III and Queen Charlotte), began pursuing Mrs. Jordan. Though she resisted for nearly a year, she eventually broke off her relationship with Ford in late summer 1791 (likely because of his refusal to marry her), and became the acknowledged mistress of the Duke. It was rumored that she was pregnant in the fall of 1791, and the papers were full of gleeful, if malicious, speculation as to who the

father was: “Little Pickle is again pregnant; but whether the infant is to be a Lawyer [child of Ford] or an Admiral [child of Clarence], time only can discover” (*Morning Post and Daily Advertiser*, Oct. 15, 1791). The press characterized Jordan as sexually promiscuous, implying she had maintained sexual relationships with both men simultaneously, even though there was no clear evidence of this behavior; the protection of her honorary title of Mrs. Ford was gone, turning her from a wife to a social-climbing whore overnight.

The break with Ford was written of in gossip columns and was the subject of satirical cartoons; the physical attraction between Dora and Clarence provided ample fodder for both:

“Saturday night the *Arch Frigate, Little Pickle*, with all her stores of *Paphian*¹ *Ammunition*, ascended her Commander’s *private dock*, in the yard of *Old Drury*.—*The Admiral* seemed to examine all her ports with great attention, and *promised* that upon the very first opportunity he would make her the receptacle of his *Royal Standard*.” (*World*, Oct. 24, 1791).

On the same day this statement appeared in the press, a satirical cartoon was published that used one of Dora’s onstage roles as a frame for understanding her new royal connection. The role is Nell in the farce *The Devil to Pay, or The Wives Metamorphosed*. Nell is a cobbler’s wife whose husband, Jobson, drinks too much and is physically abusive. Nell’s sweet nature is rewarded when a doctor performs a spell and changes her place with the harridan wife of Sir John Lovemore. Lady Lovemore suffers abuse at Jobson’s hands, while Nell charms Sir John and his household with her gentle ways. The doctor reveals the plot, Lady Lovemore and Jobson repent their violent behavior, and the women return to their rightful husbands with assurances of better marriages.

this dream will soon be over. A personal attack on Dora is further displayed by the inscription on the chamber pot under the bed. The chamber pot, commonly referred to as a Jordan, reads “Public Jordan open to all Parties” suggesting that Dora is sexually available to anyone now that she has left one lover for another. The subtitle of the cartoon refers to Clarence, a naval officer, as Neptune, god of the sea, who has “forded—” a reference both to Richard Ford and to his previous access to—the “Jordan.” This cartoon draws on a specific role associated with Mrs. Jordan in order to frame her relationship with Clarence as superficial and disastrous to her reputation. The cartoon invites laughter at this offstage farce just as theatrical audiences have laughed at her onstage performances of Nell.

Later in the same week, on October 28, a second cartoon appeared, this one called “The Flattering Glass, or Nell’s Mistake.” In the cartoon, Dora looks at her reflection, where she sees herself wearing a ducal coronet; this parallels a moment in *The Devil to Pay* when Nell looks into a mirror and sees herself as Lady Lovemore. Dora exclaims, “Oh, Gemini!” a favorite expression of Nell’s. On the table in the back is a notice reading “In Private Rehearsal The Alchemist Doll Common by Mrs. J.” Doll Common is the name of a prostitute in Ben Jonson’s



Figure 3 William Dent, *The Flattering Glass, or Nell’s Mistake*, October 28, 1791

The Alchemist, and Clarence appears in the picture calling her to this “private rehearsal.” “Nelly! Nelly come here and Play your Part! Oh! How purdy she does it!” Though somewhat confusing with references to both Doll and to Nell, the idea

that Dora is no better than a prostitute and is living in a fantasy is quite clear. Other elements of the print include a poster showing Clarence “sporting in the River Jordan” which is “not at present FORDABLE” and a cat urinating on the Order of the Garter—perhaps because the Garter is a sign of the monarch’s favor.

Mrs. Jordan, though far from unaffected by the gossip and attacks on her character, did not respond directly until she was accused of abandoning her children: *Bon Ton* magazine wrote, “To be mistress to the King’s son Little Pickle thinks it respectable, and so away go all tender ties to children”(qtd. Fothergill 148). Since Ford made no move refute these accusations, she published letters in which he outlined the terms of their arrangement, which included settling £600 per year on Ford’s daughters (see Tomalin 125-127), with provision for Dora’s sister, who lived with the girls and ran their household. After the publication of the letters, public sympathy quickly diminished for Richard Ford, who had behaved badly to allow such accusations to stand against the mother of his children. In this instance, Dora provided the public with private information demonstrating her responsible and caring maternity in order to counteract accusations of callous behavior. Though she continued to face ridicule regarding her relationship with Clarence, Ford’s letters demonstrated her clear willingness to fulfill her maternal obligations; because of the financial arrangements made for her children, her maternity was also presented as the motive for continuing her career when she published a letter in the papers:

...there can be no impropriety in my answering those who have so ungenerously attacked me, that if they could drive me from that profession, they would take from me the *only income* I have, or mean to possess, the whole earnings of which, upon the past, and one-half for the future, I have already *settled* upon my children.
(Boaden 1:209-11)

Such demonstrations went a long way to restoring her position in the public eye.

She used her maternity in similar ways when she was forced to withdraw from the theatre unexpectedly due to her own or a child's illness (with fourteen children, this was not a rare occurrence). For example, while pregnant with her third child by Clarence in 1796, their daughter Sophie responded poorly to a small pox inoculation. Dora sent a notice to the theatre she could not perform, but the reason was not initially made public. In response to criticism for not fulfilling her professional obligations, Dora, or the managers, released information about Sophie's condition, thus framing Dora's absence from the theatre as necessary so that she could perform her private role as devoted, caring mother at home.

That same season, in 1796, she performed Nell in *The Devil to Pay*. This time, no jokes suggesting the conflation of on and offstage life are to be found. Instead, the sight of Mrs. Jordan's pregnant body inspires sympathy and gratitude in her audience. One reviewer wrote, "Mrs. JORDAN performed *Nell* with her accustomed excellence and was encored in some songs. Her appearance on the stage in *her situation* is a strong proof of her wishes to please the Public. The audience felt this; and they were equally filled with admiration, gratitude, and pity" (*Morning Post and Fashionable World*, November 24, 1796). Instead of her body becoming a site for humor and double entendre as in 1791, her pregnant body inspired pathos and admiration.

Through Jordan's onstage performances as a professional actress, and accounts of her offstage performances as a private woman and mother, audiences maintained a dual awareness of Jordan's public and private lives. Though this brought pain in 1791, that crisis was also a lesson in managing public opinion. By sharing her domestic circumstances with her audiences when necessary, she avoided criticism for unprofessional behavior and protected her reputation as a

loving mother, particularly when her professional and personal obligations competed.

Jordan and Clarence remained together for twenty years, separating in 1811 when Clarence decided he must marry and produce legitimate heirs. By this point, the public's sympathy was firmly with Mrs. Jordan, who had proven herself a devoted mother and wife in all but name. His decision to leave her was openly criticized; Peter Pindar, the man who first named her Thalia, the comic muse, wrote a poem entitled "The R—l Lover, or The Admiral on a Lee Shore:"

What! Leave a woman to her tears?
 Your faithful friend for twenty years;
 One who gave up all her youthful charms,
 The fond companion of your arms!
 Brought you ten smiling girls and boys,
 Sweet pledges of connubial joys;
 As much your wife in honor's eye,
 As if fast bound in wedlock's tie. (qtd Tomalin 248)

In this case, Mrs. Jordan no longer had to defend herself with her maternity, she had champions in the press to do it for her. Even ten years after the separation (three years after the Duke's marriage to Adelaide of Saxe-Meiningen and five years after Dora's death), a cartoon entitled *Cl—ce's Dream or Binnacle Billy receiving an unwelcome visit from the other world* appeared in which Jordan's ghost accuses the Duke of cruelty from beyond the grave, condemning Clarence for allowing her to die in poverty.



Figure 4 Isaac Cruikshank, *Cl---ce's Dream or Binnacle Billy receives an unwelcome visit from the other world*, April 1821. Dora's speech begins "False, fleeting, perjur'd Clarence," a quotation from Act 1, scene 4 of *Richard III*.

Dora Jordan and the other actresses in my study were working mothers at a time when domesticity was, supposedly, the feminine ideal. Studying their lives, and the ways in which they reconciled their on and offstage personas during pregnancy, facilitates a clearer picture of the limits of and strategies behind women's agency in the long eighteenth century. Furthermore, this dissertation offers a historical view of an issue still facing women today, the challenge of balancing professional success with motherhood and pregnancy, and therefore holds implications for contemporary as well as historical gender roles.

Epilogue

Though I have subtitled this presentation the "performance" of maternity, I do not mean to suggest that Dora's love for her children was in any way insincere, merely that it was impossible for Jordan to live a public life without facing scrutiny of her private behavior, not unlike celebrities today. She once wrote to Clarence during a long absence from her family, "I know of no happiness unconnected with you and my dear children, and would sacrifice part of my existence to be able to spend the remainder with you and them..." (Jordan MSS.DJ.35).

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